

Spectacular, unrestrained growth characterized nearly every aspect of American life from the beginning of Andrew Jackson's administration in 1829 to the onset of the Civil War in 1861. Geographical expansion swept westward with the conquest of territory in the Southwest in the Mexican War (1846–1848) and the negotiation of new borders with the British in the Northwest. The earlier trickle of fur traders into the Western wilderness became a swelling stream of agricultural emigrants searching for new land and of treasure-seekers rushing to the newly discovered gold fields of California. The nation's population, which had doubled between 1790 and 1830, doubled again before 1870. But as America was growing it was changing. A nation that had developed its basic values in a context of farms, villages, and small cities had to face the new concentrations of population and economic power created by an industrial and urban society. The old and deep American belief in individualism, with its attendant promises of liberty and equality of opportunity, had to confront the sudden fact of a mass society in which many were barred by poverty or lack of education from any possibility of self-development. Reform was as much the spirit of the age as expansion, but its aim was less the creation of a new society than the recovery of the one originally promised in the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Thus, America was propelled by two forces: dissatisfaction with the present and optimism about the future. This optimism was based in part on the dynamic progress in science and technology. If America still lagged behind Britain and Europe in scientific research, it soon excelled in the practical application of scientific knowledge, in everything from soil and mineral surveys of wilderness lands to the invention and development of machine tools.

This new technology was directly related to the monumental tasks that faced the expanding nation. The introduction of the reaper and other agricultural machines helped to open the Western lands to farming; and new roads, canals, and railroads helped to master vast distances. The railroad, especially, became the center of the expanding economy: 10,000 miles of railroad crisscrossed the Eastern states by 1860. A new system of communications also helped to conquer distance and bind the nation together. The first telegraph line was strung between Baltimore and Washington in 1844. This technological wonder spread so rapidly that it reached California in 1861. Few could resist the contagious optimism of such progress. The poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson felt "pity for our fathers for dying before steam and galvanism [electricity] . . . and before we borrowed the might of the elements."

If the elements themselves were free, there were distinct social costs to the industrial system they served. Manufacturers were quick to recognize the efficiencies of mass-production methods and the advantages of replacing skilled workers with machinery that could

be tended by unskilled and low-paid workers, often women and children. Such methods sharply increased productivity, but they also created ugly mill towns where workers huddled in wretched shacks and endured conditions of labor that were little better than slavery. To some, the material progress that accompanied the new technology made it clear that basic American values were being left far behind. Emerson observed that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind." He warned, "The weaver becomes the web, the machinist the machine." A child whose life was blighted by ten- or twelve-hour workdays in a factory could not fulfill Jefferson's democratic ideal of citizens who were free to develop their full potential.

As Americans felt their most cherished values threatened by industrial forces, reform groups sprang up across the land. Some reform groups, seeking to establish society on an entirely new basis, created Utopian communities. Between 1820 and 1850, at least fifty-eight such communities were founded, each with its special economic theory or religious doctrine and each expecting to become a model of social perfection for the country at large. But the most effective American reformers in this period did not seek to overturn the social system or escape from it; rather they sought to adapt new industrial conditions to traditional American values.

The Beginnings of American Literature

Explorers seeking the Fountain of Youth, Puritans longing for grace, Southern planters describing the wilderness—all introduced into American culture ideas and ideals that have endured. Although Puritan-

ism as a way of life vanished, its emphasis on examining and purifying one's feelings lingers in Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for Americans to see the world not through the eyes of the past, but freshly, as if reborn. The Puritans' insistence on plainness, too, resounds in the spare poetry of Emily Dickinson and the undecorated prose of Ernest Hemingway. The Puritan vision of America as a divinely appointed place pervades later American concepts of an "American Mission," a "Manifest Destiny," or "The American Dream." Similarly, the Southern gentleman's ideal of public service survives in Washington, Jefferson, and the other Southern Revolutionary leaders; and the planter's closeness to the land lives on in the works of modern Southern writers like William Faulkner.

What the explorers, Puritans, and early Southerners share with later American writers most of all is a desire to convey the special quality of life in America, to show how they felt living in a New World, facing new experiences. From Columbus to the present, in various ways, nearly all American writers have been discovering America.

Celebrations of the Self

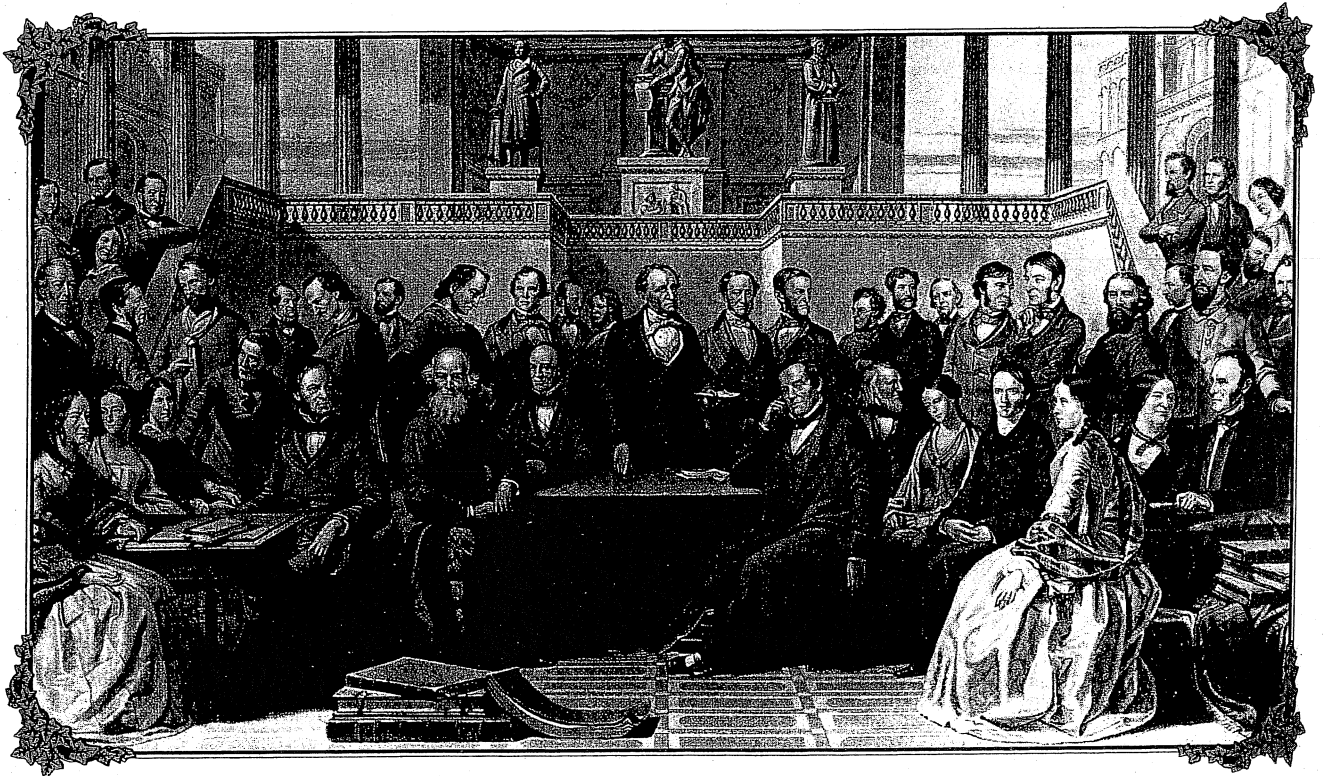
Romanticism and Transcendentalism

“Good men must not obey the laws too well,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said. His aphorism illustrates a vital key to the American character—after all, if the original colonists *had* obeyed the laws, the American Revolution would never have occurred, and the country might never have existed. This rebelliousness—so much a part of our heritage—reflects an essential aspect of Emerson’s philosophy of transcendentalism, a distinctively American offshoot of the romantic movement.

Around the beginning of the 19th century, the movement known as romanticism sprang up in both Europe and America as a reaction to everything that had come before it: the rationalism of the 18th-century



Ralph Waldo Emerson



American Authors of the 19th-century. *Seated from left:* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving (at the end of the table), and Margaret Fuller (slightly behind Irving). *Seated in right foreground:* Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Standing from left: Edgar Allan Poe (in profile facing left) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (in profile facing right). *Standing from right:* James Russell Lowell (with beard facing front) and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Bettmann Archive.

Age of Reason and, especially in America, the strict doctrines of Puritanism. Romantic artists, philosophers, and writers saw the limitations of reason and celebrated instead the glories of the individual spirit, the emotions, and the imagination as basic elements of human nature. The splendors of nature inspired the romantics more than the fear of God, and some of them felt a fascination with the supernatural.

In the first half of the century, as the U.S. population exploded and the country's borders spread westward, the romantic spirit guided American writers in their efforts to capture the energy and character of the new country. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Washington Irving were by far the most popular American writers of the time. Their works exhibit a typical romantic preoccupation with atmosphere, sentiment, and optimism.



Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow

Although Washington Irving was the first American writer to achieve international fame, the first really distinctive American literature came from the transcendentalists. The philosophy of transcendentalism, derived in part from German romanticism was based on a belief that "transcendent forms" of truth exist beyond reason and experience. However, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave this philosophy a peculiarly American spin: he said that every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his or her own, through intuition.



Washington
Irving

Henry David Thoreau, Emerson's younger friend and colleague, proved a prickly but brilliant embodiment of transcendentalist ideals as, militantly turning his back on material rewards, he devoted his life to the study of nature and his own individual spirit. His *Walden*, an account of the two years he lived alone in a one-room shack in the country (although dining regularly at Emerson's Boston house), remains a genuine American masterwork.

Walt Whitman was championed at the beginning of his career by Emerson for the ideas and style that Emerson believed the new American poetry required. Still, influential as Whitman has been in the 20th century, he waited a long time for his contribution to be recognized by the larger public in his own time. In 1855 he had to print the first collection of his poems, *Leaves of Grass*, himself. Able to sell only a few copies of the book, he gave virtually all of the 795 copies away. Meanwhile the same year of 1855, Longfellow published *The Song of Hiawatha*, which like his earlier books of poetry, sold thousands and became a bestseller.

Voices from the TIMES

The groves were God's first temples.
Ere man learned
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,
And spread the roof above them—ere
he framed
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
The sound of anthems; in the darkling
wood,
Amid the cool and silence, he knelt down,
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks
And supplication.

William Cullen Bryant
from "A Forest Hymn"

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

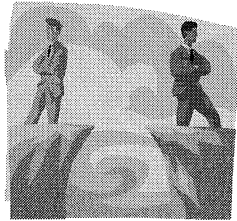
INDIVIDUALISM:

Do what is right for you. Don't follow the crowd.



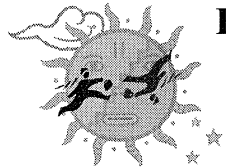
BELIEF IN YOURSELF:

Be true to one's own inner perception or intuition; hold on to your beliefs because they are right for you even if others disagree.



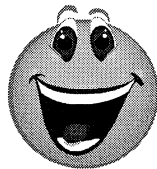
MAN, UNIVERSE AND NATURE ARE ONE:

Emerson called it the Oversoul. It can be a guide to higher understanding; nature is truth and symbolizes God or the inner life of human beings.



OPTIMISM:

All is good; evil is an illusion.



UNLIMITED POTENTIAL:

Each individual should set high goals to



improve.